

“Like the twenty-first century: it was something you wanted to wake up from – snap out of” (Amis, p. 37): Contemporary Literature and Crisis

Contemporary literature often deals with what Ossewaarde refers to as the “crises of modernity” (p. 59). These are a number of crises that are affecting modern society because of its modernity. He argues that “the clashing ideas regarding the nature of ‘modern society’ and of modern man, as well as different hierarchies of human goods, values, ideals, or commitments” (Ossewaarde, p. 60) are causing an overwhelming crisis to the modern worlds. Contemporary literature observes this crisis and can be seen as a response to it. In particular, *A Heartbreaking Work of Staggering Genius* (2000) by Dave Eggers and *Brand New Ancients* (2013) by Kate Tempest can be seen as responding directly to this crisis.

Cornelius Castoriadis, an influential French-Greek philosopher, started discussing the ‘Crisis of Modern Society’ in 1965, under the nom de plume ‘Paul Carden’, and his arguments can be witnessed within contemporary literature, in turn a reflection of contemporary society. He writes that there is a “radical crisis in the meaning of life and of human motives” (Carden) which Tempest examines when she writes that the modern world is “a sorry plight,/all isolation and worry” (Tempest, p. 4). *Brand New Ancients* explores what has become of the meaning of life for those living in modern society. Tempest takes time to examine how the world has changed in the prologue of the poem, expressing that:

The gods are in the betting shops
the gods are in the caff
the gods are smoking fags out the back
...
the gods are sick of always giving more and getting less
...
the gods are in the toilets having unprotected sex

...

the gods are watching adverts

the gods are not to blame – (p. 5)

Tempest uses this list to explore where modern meaning is drawn from, painting a dismal picture of modern society. The anaphora used and the length of this stanza make it stand out more, especially as this was originally spoken-word poetry where the anaphora would have become almost chant-like to the listener. It ends with the crescendo announcing that “the gods are not to blame” with a terminal caesura denoting a pause, a breath, before Tempest goes on to explore how people are striving to better the world – the people in the council and teachers. This section markedly does not follow the same anaphoric pattern as previously used which suggests a softened tone; this may be to imply the sympathy she feels for the people still trying to make a difference. However, the balance between the two sections of this stanza suggests that, what Carden refers to as “the tremendous chaos and sense of impotence concerning the proper affairs of society, the human affairs, the way social systems work, etc.”, is a prevalent mindset. Tempest seems to believe that for most people “They hope there’s something more to life but can’t imagine what” (p. 6).

Carden further argues that “the crisis shows itself in the destruction and disappearance of responsibility”, a suggestion of which can be seen in Tempest’s work. Though Dave Eggers catalogues this crisis more completely in his work. *AHWOSG* is a memoir focusing largely on Dave Eggers taking responsibility for raising his younger brother, Toph. However, he is frequently shown to be less than capable of this responsibility. It is not that he does not have the capacity to be responsible; he is shown throughout to be an intelligent and resourceful person. It is that he does not take the role seriously. He states, “I am making our lives a music video, a game show on Nickelodeon” (Eggers, p. 88) suggesting that he views his role as an entertainer rather

than a parent figure. He also uses the examples of short, and often commercialised, entertainment in his analogy which further depreciates his role as a responsible adult. The use of television further shows how the text is responding to the modern crisis as scholars “identify the ‘crisis of modernity’ as a crisis of the mind—the lowering of civic and intellectual standards that they believe comes with the mechanization of the world” (Ossewaarde, p. 67). This can be witnessed in Eggers exploration of his role as parent using the medium of television. It can be further seen in how both texts discuss the issues surrounding television.

In modern society, and as previously demonstrated, “TV becomes a technology for constructing the rules or “constitutions” of everyday life” (Ouellette and Hay, p. 8), but it appears to have become too intrusive. Eggers chronicles an episode of his life where his mother is suffering a catastrophic nosebleed whilst they are watching the TV, a show that appears to be *American Gladiators*. He doesn’t specifically name it as such, instead he refers to it as “the show where young amateur athletes with day jobs in marketing and engineering compete in sports of strength and agility against male and female bodybuilders ... like Firestar and Mercury and Zenith” (Eggers, pp. 4-5). However, the reference as “the show”, rather than “a show”, suggests a common vernacular where the reader will understand the reference. He uses the show to discuss the fickleness of TV. Eggers originally states, “It is a great show” (p. 5) but when the contestant, the everyday man (in this case an accountant (p. 9)), loses, Eggers says, “It’s terrible. I won’t watch this show again” (p. 9), yet he proceeds to stay focused on the television for the rest of the chapter. He is so preoccupied with the TV that it becomes his main concern, over that of helping his ailing mother. Whilst attempting to stop her nosebleed he complains, “I can’t do both things while sitting on the arm of the couch and still be in a position to see the television” (Eggers, p. 19) and goes to

extreme lengths to get himself into a comfortable position in which he can still watch the television. Furthermore, Eggers and his sister's main concern in the hospital room of their father is that there is "“No TV, though.” “Yeah, that's weird.”" (Eggers, p. 37). Eggers frequently depicts television as an escape from reality as modern society has "made TV integral to living, shaping, and often improving one's life" (Ouellette and Hay, p. 29) but arguably at a very large cost.

Reality TV appears to be particularly to blame for this epidemic of television obsessed people:

In a given week, we can learn how to succeed at work (*The Apprentice, America's Next Top Model, Project Runway*), how to win a desirable mate (*The Bachelor/Bachelorette, Joe Millionaire*), how to be stylish (*What Not to Wear*), sophisticated (*Queer Eye for the Straight Guy*) and personable (*Beauty and the Geek*), how to survive natural and manmade challenges (*Survivor, Big Brother*), how to nourish our health and psyche (*Honey We're Killing the Kids, Starting Over*), how to put our personal finances in order (*Suze Orman, Mad Money with Jim Cramer*), how to enhance an ordinary house or car (*Trading Spaces, Pimp My Ride*), how to transform our bodies (*Extreme Makeover, The Swan, the Fitness Channel*), how to maximize sexual performance and intimacy (*Sex Inspectors, Berman and Berman*), how to manage our families and domestic lives (*Supernanny, Wife Swap, the Food Network*), how to prepare for dangers and emergencies (*Storm Stories, It Takes a Thief, What Should You Do?*), and even how to restore blighted cityscapes (*Town Haul*). (Ouellette and Hay, p. 2-3)

How these texts respond to these crises:

Obsession with reality tv/celebrity culture:

"Although reality TV whets our desire for the authentic, much of our engagement with such texts paradoxically hinges on our awareness that what we are watching is constructed and contains "fictional" elements" (Ouellette and Murray, p. 7)

"Reality TV also establishes new relationships between "reality" and its representation" (Ouellette and Murray, p. 7)

Gives the same warning before the book as before “reality” television shows “this is not, actually, a work of pure nonfiction” (Eggers, p. ix) – uses this to show people’s obsession with it - form

“*You have no problem being inside a fishbowl. I feel like I’m already inside a fishbowl. Why? I feel like I’m being watched at all times*” (Eggers, p. 212)

“Celebrities have higher levels of narcissism than the general population, and reality TV celebrities have the highest levels of all” (Gibson et al., p. 67)

“celebrities might be “superspreaders” of narcissism, contributing to this population trend” (Gibson et al., p. 68)

“getting pissed on her own watching the chat shows” (Tempest, p. 11)

“Why is this interesting? Why are we watching?” (Tempest, p. 28)

““What are celebrities for?” an answer might be “to keep us spending.”” (Cashmore, p. 13)

“We all despise it, are enthralled by it, morbidly curious” (Eggers, p. 167)

“Reality TV has moved from the fringes of television culture to its lucrative core” (Ouellette and Murray, p. 6)

“We don’t need *The Real World*, we don’t need any crutches, we don’t need an ongoing role on a television show with a massive worldwide audience and an unquantifiable kind of influence over the hearts and minds of the young and impressionable” (Eggers, p. 240)

“reality television programs are commercial, sensational, popular, entertaining, and potentially exploitative or manipulative” (Murray, p. 68)

“potentially some very negative behavioral consequences that could result from exposure to that content” (Gibson et al., p. 71)

“millions of viewers may also be influenced towards more self-destructive behaviour” (Persaud and Bruggen)

“Reality TV is fast, cheap and totally addictive ... causing us to become dumber, fatter and more disengaged from ourselves and society” (Hill, p. 7) – to next paragraph

Breakdown of community and family

“I don’t know the names of my neighbours,/but I know the names of the rich and the famous” (Tempest, p. 28) – link back to Hill ^

“it’s been cast by the directors of commercials for banks” (Eggers, p. 256)

“she couldn’t make out the grain of their wood through the layers of varnish” (Tempest, p. 30)

“the family room is usually dark” (Eggers, p. 8)

“Three souls under one roof all lonely” (Tempest, p. 9)

“The current family crisis thus stems from structural more than cultural change—changes in the economy, a pared-down nuclear family, and less parental time at home” (Giele, p. 81)

“She chain-smokes, drinking till she starts to feel quease,/and then when Clive gets home from school,/that’s where he finds her, fast asleep” (Tempest, p. 11)

“a couple streets away/his other son is kicking up the stones on his own” (Tempest, p. 12)

“Father absence is blamed by the fatherhood movement for the rise in violence among young males” (Giele, p. 79)

“Without a parent to supervise children after school, keep them from watching television all day, or prevent them from playing in dangerous neighborhoods, many more children appear to be falling by the wayside, victims of drugs, obesity, violence, suicide, or failure in school” (Giele, p. 79)

“the traditional patriarchal family, is more and more broken down” (Carden)

“Brian shouts at Mary, Mary shouts at Clive,/and Little Clive soaks it up with wide eyes” (Tempest, p. 9)

“That face on the street you walk past without looking at,/or that face on the street that walks past you without looking back” (Tempest, p. 2)

“There is practically no community life, ties become extremely disrupted” (Carden)

“A major effect of modernity is the breakup of old-style communities in which the bonds people had with each other were organic” (Cashmore, p. 86)

“the gods can’t stop checking Facebook on their phones” (Tempest, p. 5)

“I want humanity./I don’t want this vacuous cavity” (Tempest, p. 29)

Loss of anything to fight for/position in society

“we are *owed*, goddammit – and so we are expecting everything, everything” (Eggers, p. 47)

“younger generations are saddled with the unresolved issues of excessive debt, diminished prospects, and downward social mobility” (Ossewaarde, p. 69)

“when everything is weighted on the scales of profit,/it can be hard for a young man to grow up honest” (Tempest, p. 10)

“this richer and more prosperous society possibly contains more tensions within it than most other societies we have known in history.” (Carden)

“In the old days they would have been warriors/swords singing the names of all the throats that they’d stopped/but in these times they’re out on the high street,

smoking,/nothing to fight for but fighting itself” (Tempest, p. 20) – form as an epic poem

“I was meant to have done so much more with my life,/instead I got lost in this bullshit, this hype” (Tempest, p. 31)

“we once admired people who do great things, now we admire people who play people who do great things” (Cashmore, p. 50)

“a God who knows better than most how to settle for less” (Tempest, p. 9)

“how can we explain how we hate ourselves,/the things we’ve made ourselves into,/the way we break ourselves in two,/the way we overcomplicate ourselves?” (Tempest, p. 1)

“We punish ourselves for our comfortable childhoods” (Eggers, p. 203)

“People are dissatisfied, people are grumbling, people are protesting, constant conflicts exist” (Carden)

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